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WILLIAM STERNDALE BENNETT

SELECTED PIECES
FOR
PIANOFORTE
IN
TWO VOLUMES

EDITED AND FINGERED BY
KARL KLAUSER
AND
WM. SCHARFENBERG

VOLUME I CONTAINS A
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR BY
W. J. HENDERSON

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SIR WILLIAM STERNDALE BENNETT was born at Sheffield, England, on April 13, 1816. His father was Robert Bennett, an organist and song-writer, who died when the boy was only three years old. His grandfather, John Bennett, a lay clerk, attended to his education. At the age of eight the child became a singer in the choir of King's College, Cambridge, where his grandfather lived. He remained in the choir two years, and developed such musical gifts that he was placed in the Royal Academy of Music, where his serious study of his art began. He studied composition under Lucas and Crotch, and piano playing under W. W. Holmes and afterward under Cipriani Potter. The youth attained high distinction as a student, and the composition which stands as Opus 1 on the list of his published works was one of his pupil productions. It is his piano concerto in D minor, produced at the prize concert in 1833. It evoked praise from Mendelssohn, who was present, and was published at the expense of the Academy. In 1836 his unpublished concerto in F minor and his "Naiads" overture so impressed the members of an English piano firm, that they offered to pay the expenses of a year's residence in Leipsic for the young composer.

In Leipsic he produced much good music, and won the friendship and critical admiration of Schumann. He revisited Leipsic in the years 1840 and 1841. He made London his home, however, and began a series of chamber concerts which lasted from 1843 to 1856 and made his playing familiar to the English public. In 1844 he married Mary Anne Wood, daughter of a captain in the navy. In 1849 he founded the Bach Society, which has done so much for the study of the great cantor's music in England. This society produced the St. Matthew Passion for the first time in England, and Bennett shares the honor of that undertaking with Mendelssohn. In 1856 Bennett became conductor of the London Philharmonic Society, and held the post till 1866, when he was made director of the Royal Academy of Music. In 1856 also he was chosen professor of music at Cambridge University, which institution made him a Master of Arts and a Doctor of Music. In 1870 Oxford conferred upon him the degree of D.C.L., and in 1871 he was knighted. He was honored by a public testimonial in 1872, and a scholarship in his name was established at the Royal Academy of Music. He died after a short illness on Feb. 1, 1875, in London.

Bennett's principal works are The May Queen, a cantata, written for the Leeds festival of 1858; the ode for the opening of the International Exposition of 1862; The Woman of Samaria, oratorio, for the Birmingham festival of 1867; a symphony in G minor; the overtures entitled "Parisina" and "The Naiads"; four concertos for piano and orchestra, of which that in F minor is the finest; the pianoforte sextet, opus 8, and the "Maid of Orleans" sonata. He wrote also a large number of piano solo compositions, and some vocal music.

Bennett was not one of the great masters, but he was one of the very few English composers who attained a distinctive style. His works are not of the kind that excite or move a hearer, but they will always command admiration because of the excellence of their art. The influences which moulded Bennett's style are not difficult to discern. First was that of Cipriani Potter, who was an enthusiastic admirer of Mozart and who imparted much of his enthusiasm to Bennett. Not a little of the clearness and suavity of Bennett's style may be traced to his fondness for Mozart. The second influence was inevitable, that of Mendelssohn, who was the idol of England in Bennett's younger days and who was worshipped in Leipsic when he visited that city. To his admiration of Mendelssohn we certainly owe the perfection of form and the finish of style which are the most striking characteristics of his compositions. It is impossible for any student of Bennett's piano pieces to fail to discover the minute care which he exercised in the construction of every measure. Nothing is set down without knowledge and forethought, and if perhaps the smoothness of it all seems prosaic to those accustomed to the stormy effects of more recent writers, it is none the less delightful to those who can appreciate the perfect fitness of every phrase to the general design. Organic unity is one of the strong essentials of all Bennett's work, and if his compositions lack power, they are certainly not without grace, fluency and amiability. No doubt his compositions gained much from his own admirable performance of them, as we may judge from the following comments of Schumann:

"The first thing that strikes every one in the character of his compositions is their remarkable family resemblance to those of Mendelssohn. The same beauty of form, poetic depth yet clearness and ideal purity, the same outwardly satisfying impression—but with a difference. The difference is still more observable in their playing than in their compositions. The Englishman's playing is perhaps more tender, more careful in detail; that of Mendelssohn is broader, more energetic. The former bestows fine shading on the lightest thing, the latter pours a novel force into the most powerful passages; one overpowers us with the transfigured expression of a single form, the other showers forth hundreds of angelic heads, as in a heaven of Raphael. Something of the same kind occurs in their compositions. If Mendelssohn produces in fantastic sketches the whole fairy world of a 'Midsummer Night's Dream', Bennett in his music evokes the charming figures of 'The Merry Wives of Windsor'; one spreads out before us the broad, deep, slumbering surface of the sea, the other lingers beside a balmy lake, on which the beams of the moon are trembling. This brings us to three of Bennett's most lovely pictures, which have appeared in Germany (as well as two other of his works); I mean those entitled 'The Lake', 'The Mill Stream' and 'The Fountain' These are, for truth to nature, color, poetic conception, musical Claude Lorraines, living tone-landscapes; the last especially becomes, under the hands of its composer, really magical in effect."

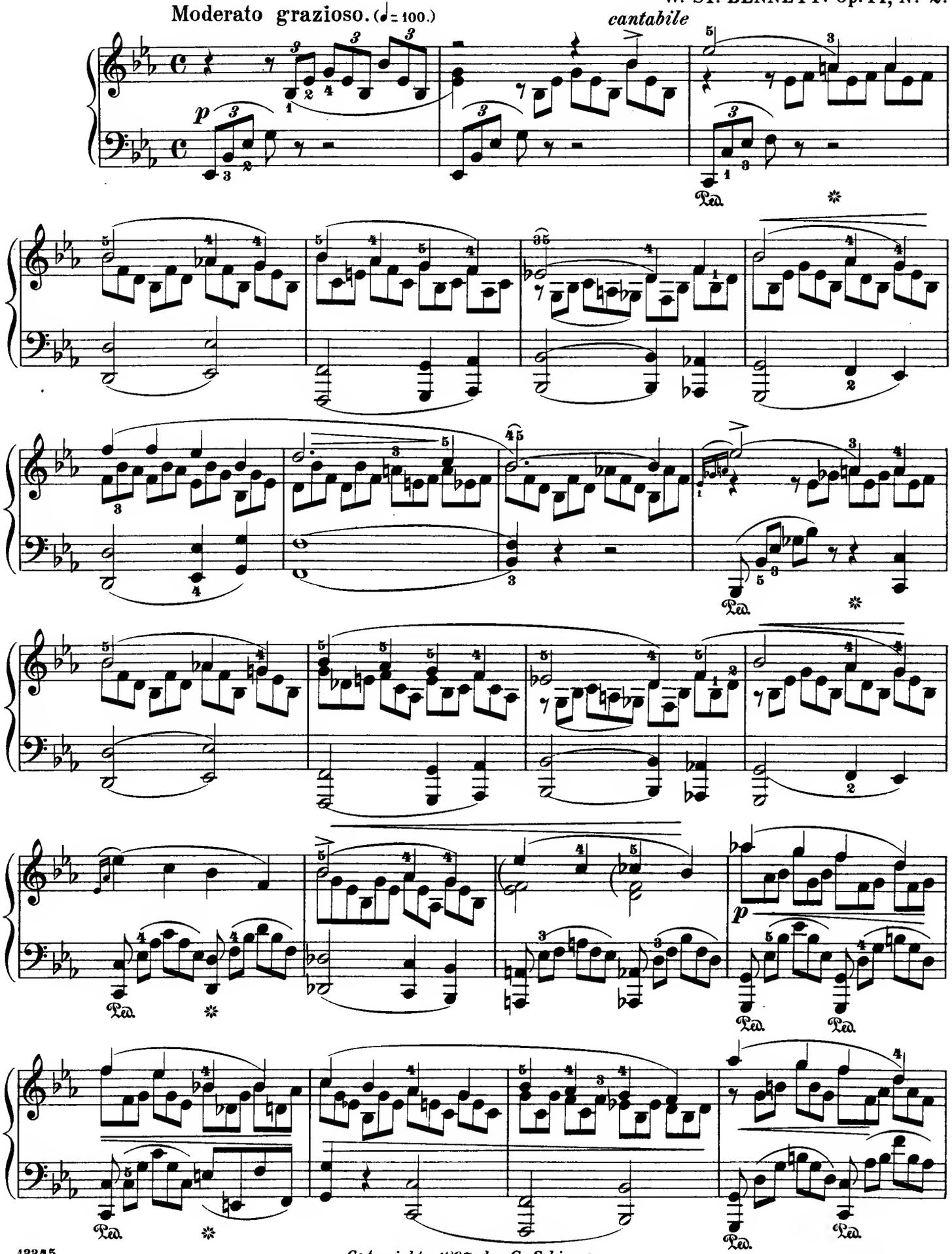
It is necessary to add only a brief note on Bennett's piano style. The student will not find a great deal of broad cantabile writing, but an abundance of bright staccato passages and arpeggios. His compositions are full of passages which require smoothness and brilliancy of performance rather than profundity of emotion. His writing is wholly conformable to the genius of the piano, and his works are admirable as studies in clearness of execution, rapidity, and detail of accentuation. Every lover of refined and graceful piano music will find these compositions which are too much neglected, full of interest.

W. J. HENDERSON.

Romanza.

Edited and fingered by
KARL KLAUSER.

W. ST. BENNETT. Op. 14, Nº 2.



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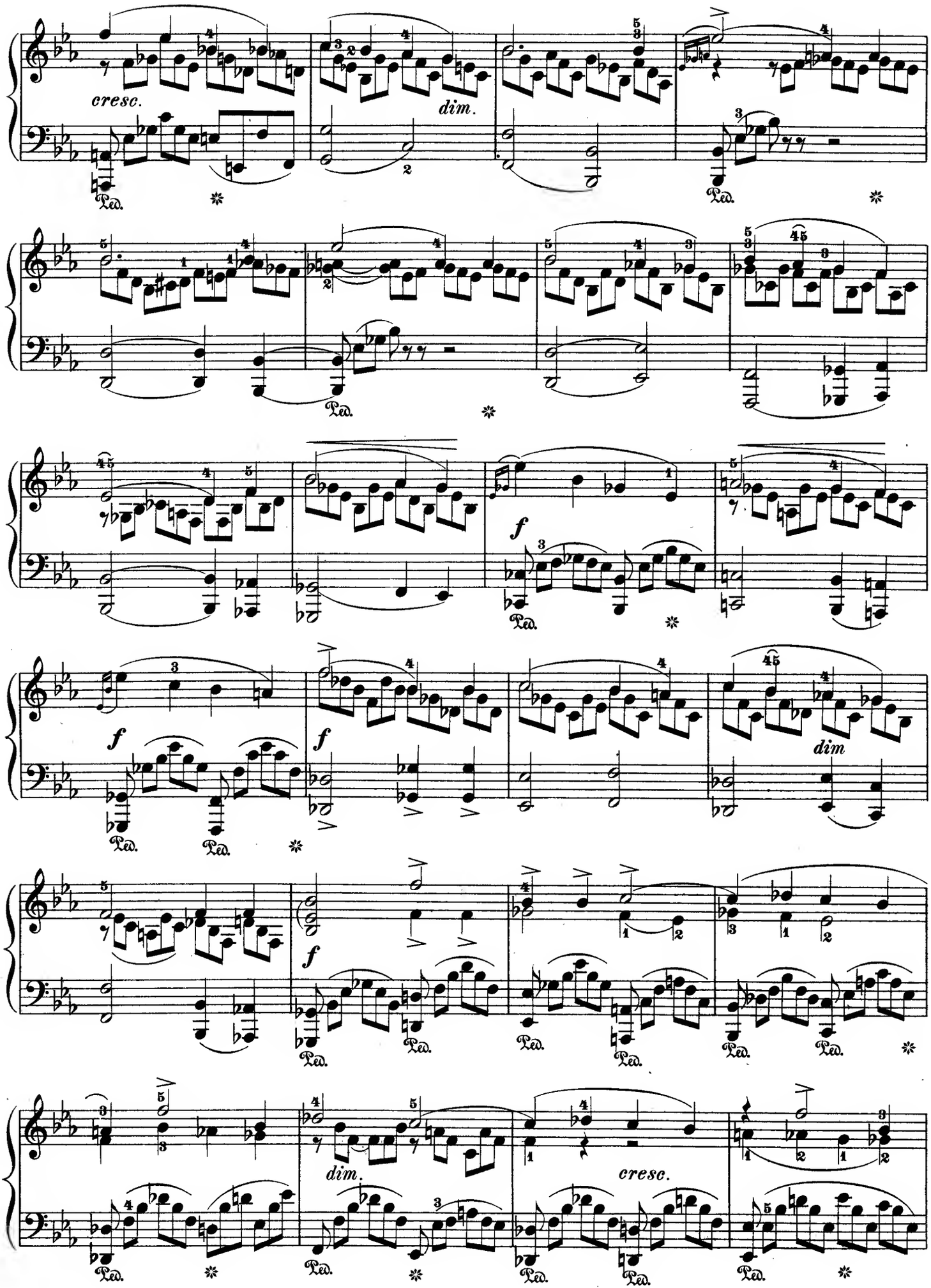
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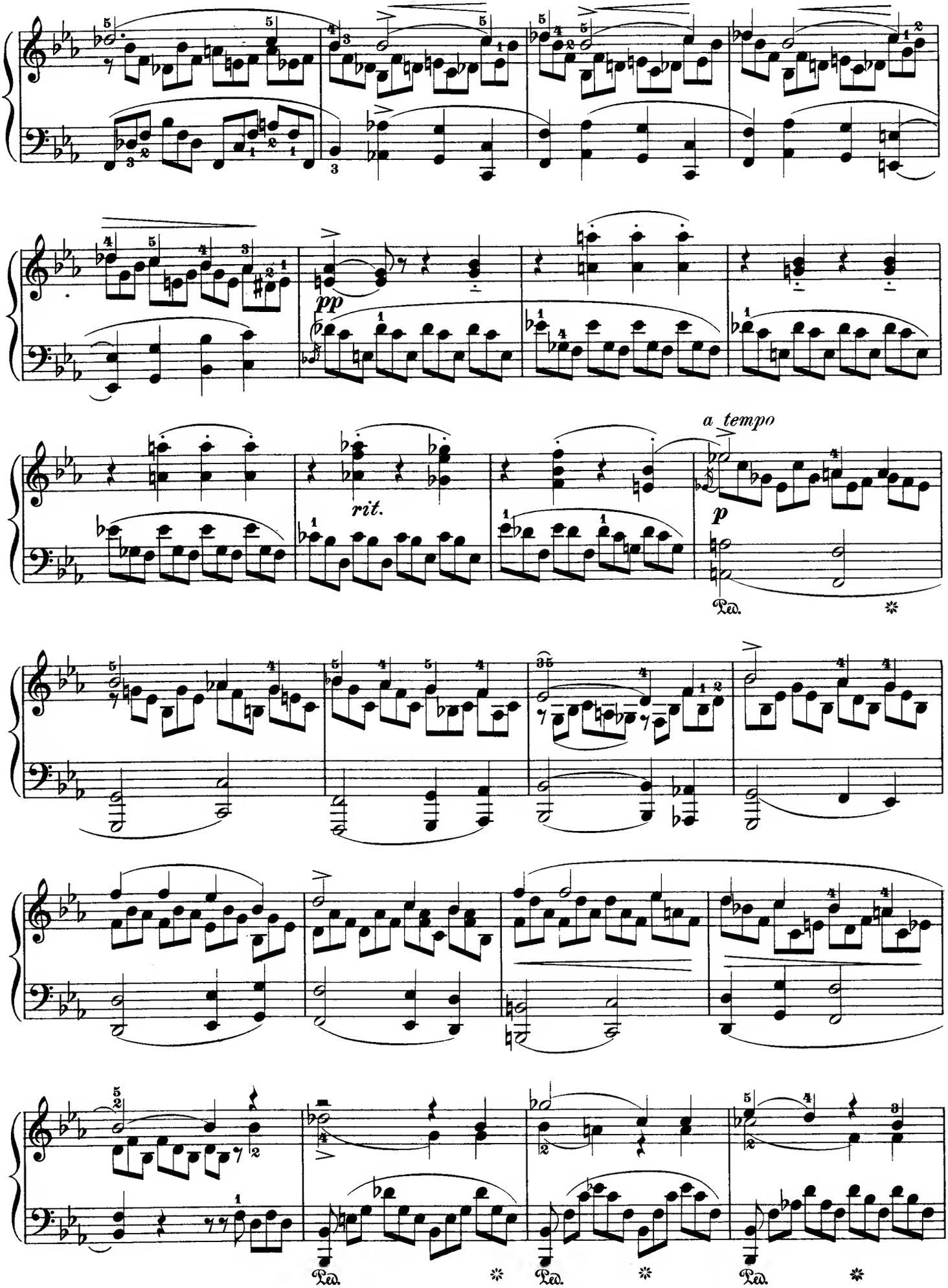
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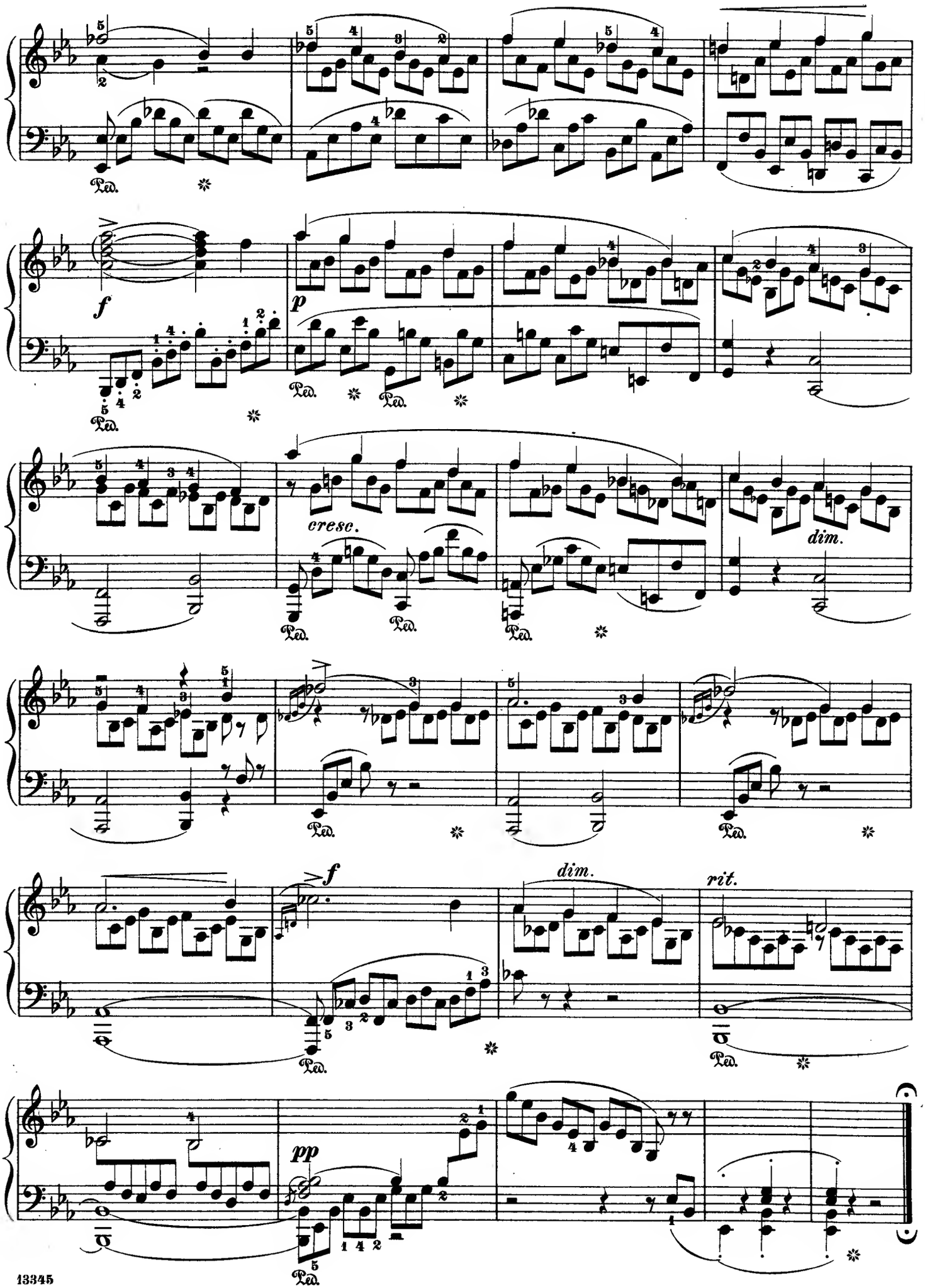
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